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Tomatoes return to menus

FDA clears supplies from some areas

By Alex Davis

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Grocery stores and restaurant chains including Louisville-based Yum! Brands are beginning to restock tomatoes, drawing on supplies from areas that have been cleared of salmonella risk by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

In a statement yesterday, Yum! said it has started resupplying tomatoes to its KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver's and A&W stores.

McDonald's said over the weekend that the chain's U.S. restaurants will reintroduce sliced tomatoes in the next seven to 10 days. Burger King is making similar plans.

Texas Roadhouse, also based in Louisville, is not yet offering tomatoes at its restaurants, but company spokesman Travis Doster said he expects that will change in the next week. Kroger spokeswoman Janet White said yesterday that the grocer will use suppliers in growing regions that have been cleared to restock varieties it had pulled earlier this month.

At least 277 illnesses in 28 states and Washington, D.C., have been linked to salmonella-tainted tomatoes. The number of illnesses is up 49 from last week. The latest known illness struck June 5, reinforcing a warning from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the outbreak isn't yet over.

A Louisville woman who contracted the illness last month represents the only known case in Kentucky. She has recovered.

The best lead remains a cluster of nine illnesses listed last week among patrons of an unidentified restaurant. Food and Drug Administration investigators were at work yesterday tracing records of the restaurant's various suppliers, part of the painstaking work of cross-checking common suppliers for other parts of the country where people got sick.

Varieties of raw tomatoes associated with the outbreak include raw red plum, red Roma and round red tomatoes. Federal authorities still haven't pinpointed the source of the outbreak, but say parts of Florida and Mexico were supplying most of the nation's tomatoes when the outbreak began in April and are leading suspects.

Tomatoes from northern Florida are in the clear because they weren't ready for harvest at the time of the outbreak. Also, one part of Mexico -- Baja California -- has been cleared because its harvest began April 26 and the earliest known patient in the salmonella outbreak fell sick on April 10, Dr. David Acheson, FDA food safety chief, said yesterday.

Testing of tomatoes, including those from various parts of Mexico, hasn't yet turned up any salmonella, Acheson said.

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